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THE SOURCES OF HISTORY:  
STUDIES IN THE USES OF HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

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*The Sources of History:  
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# The Western European Powers 1500–1700

by

CHARLES H. CARTER



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in memory of  
my  
beloved father  
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## *General Editor's Introduction*

By what right do historians claim that their reconstructions of the past are true, or at least on the road to truth? How much of the past can they hope to recover: are there areas that will remain for ever dark, questions that will never receive an answer? These are problems which should and do engage not only the scholar and student but every serious reader of history. In the debates on the nature of history, however, attention commonly concentrates on philosophic doubts about the nature of historical knowledge and explanation, or on the progress that might be made by adopting supposedly new methods of analysis. The disputants hardly ever turn to consider the materials with which historians work and which must always lie at the foundation of their structures. Yet, whatever theories or methods the scholar may embrace, unless he knows his sources and rests upon them he will not deserve the name of historian. The bulk of historical evidence is much larger and more complex than most laymen and some professionals seem to know, and a proper acquaintance with it tends to prove both exhilarating and sobering—exhilarating because it opens the road to unending enquiry, and sobering because it reduces the inspiring theory and the new method to their proper subordinate place in the scheme of things. It is the purpose of this series to bring this fact to notice by showing what we have and how it may be used.

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## *A Reader's Prospectus*

The scope and intent of this book may best be understood within the framework of the series of which it is a part: dealing with a particular type of 'Sources of History' in a given period, with the treatment reflected in the series' subtitle: *Studies in the Uses of Historical Evidence*.

The sources in question are diplomatic sources, a straightforward term that might seem to require no definition but in fact has two. It is a convenient but ambiguous label with two overlapping but very different meanings: sources of *diplomatic origin* (which might be about anything) and the sources of *diplomatic history* (which may be of non-diplomatic origin). Though the former documents are basic to the latter purpose, they are neither limited to it nor, by themselves, sufficient for it. On the one hand, the documents produced by diplomatic activity include important sources for a good many kinds of history besides diplomatic. On the other hand, the sources essential for writing diplomatic history, though those of diplomatic origin are naturally central, include various other kinds, some not manuscript in form nor even documentary in nature. 'Diplomatic sources' under both of these definitions are dealt with herein. Both types, one may add, must be dealt with in the context of the diplomatic machinery that was developing in the period and the evolving 'state system' it served, which are discussed in Chapter 1.

Both 'developing' and 'evolving' are appropriate terms both for the organisation and composition of European political units in the period (as in others) and for the system by which they



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conducted their affairs with each other. In 1500 the latter bore little resemblance to what it has been in more recent times; in 1700 it did. Actually, of course, neither date has any such particular meaning in that development as 1454 or 1494 or 1713-14 would have, but that is as it should be. Evolution, almost by definition, knows no precise beginning nor final perfection: a crucial factor which even merely symbolic terminal dates might obscure and which wholly arbitrary ones serve far better. In sum, one is concerned not with beginnings and ends but with a span of time during which essential developments took place, the span that lies between the Middle Ages, as that term applies to diplomacy, and the eighteenth century, itself not a very precise chronological term as used by historians.

It is not this book's intention to provide a comprehensive guide to diplomatic archives nor a detailed inventory of diplomatic sources (in either sense). The former has already been done,<sup>1</sup> and the latter is patently impossible in a single volume, since it involves dozens of archives, hundreds of collections and millions of documents (some individual catalogues of which are discussed in Chapter 3). Instead, my purpose is to describe various types of diplomatic sources, collections and repositories, and discuss their nature and use.

To give this treatment greater depth of coverage, its lateral reach has been mainly confined to four states: Spain and France, as the two truly great powers of the period; England, as an emerging power and the only one of importance that continued so throughout this period (and perhaps the one of greatest interest to readers of this English language book); and the Spanish Netherlands, not only as an excellent example of an aborted 'state' but as the principal territorial focus of international

<sup>1</sup> See Daniel H. Thomas and Lynn M. Case, *Guide to the Diplomatic archives of western Europe* (Philadelphia, 1959). There are individual published guides for most of the major archives and many lesser ones, some countries have published specialised guides to specific foreign archives or collections (mainly for research in the publishing country's own history), and there are, of course, catalogues to many collections; some of the more useful of these various aids are cited in Chapter 3.

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disputes in this period and in consequence a principal locus of historical sources about them. One may justify this on the grounds that the book's main focus is upon great powers, and that others, such as Sweden and Denmark, hold that status for relatively brief periods at best. Germany is a double anomaly, its individual states being below the sovereign status associated with regular diplomatic activity and the Emperor above it; the latter anomaly is further complicated by the close post-1556 ties with the senior branch of the house of Habsburg, the distinction having been for a time obliterated by the king of Spain's holding the imperial throne himself in 1519-56. (Moreover, a volume on Central Europe and its historical sources is planned for this series.) The papacy is a further supra-national anomaly in inter-national affairs. With the exception of Savoy and Venice at the northern corners, the 'states' of Italy were very soon either Spanish domains or satellites or too weak to count for much in European diplomacy except as victims and pawns. As scholars and students of the history of any of these will well understand, it has required some self-discipline to resist the siren songs of the north, the east and the Italian scene and maintain a focus-in-depth upon the four named (the eagle-eyed reader will in fact notice an occasional lapse). This, however, is with regard to specifics described; the characteristics which they illustrate and generalisations made with regard to types of source materials, problems of use, etc., have of course more general application.

For this sort of analytical discussion one must naturally resort to examples. As, even within the above delimitations, the available ones are usually enormous in number, the criteria used for their selection should perhaps be specified. Although there are some inevitable and intentional exceptions in specific cases, a thin (chronological and geographical) veneer has, where possible, been abjured in favour of concentration, expending, with regard to a given matter, one's necessarily limited quota of examples on a concise period, a particular country, one or two archives, etc. The purpose is to illustrate types, and obviously concentration allows more adequate illustration.

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An adequate degree of such concentration precludes an egalitarian national balance within every individual topic, but that has little to recommend it anyway. I have sought instead, by selectively rotating the emphasis—French published documents, Belgian serials, English and Spanish archives, etc.—an over-all balance which I hope will also give an adequate picture of national strengths, shortcomings and other special considerations worthy of note.

This procedure also facilitates a limited departure from the standard cliché citations, a matter which, to this historian's view at least, seems seriously pressing. A thin spread of the most conspicuous examples of some types would result in merely one more listing of well-known items, which would not only be pointlessly redundant since they are already easy to find but in many cases undesirable: some are so overused, that they would be far better forgotten. To speak bluntly, it is of vital importance that the long-established canon of sources, for diplomatic history and for other categories—always inadequate and now worn threadbare to boot, yet still strangely sanctified—be radically expanded if historical knowledge (of at least many aspects of this period) is ever to emerge from its superannuated embryo. If this volume aspires to be a guide to anything it is to possible outward passages over the walls, beyond the sanctified sources, problems, issues, questions (and answers) and *Dramatis Personae*—which have never been more than partial at best, nor revealed more than part of the truth.

Regarding examples (illustrations), there is chronologically something of a bulge in the middle of the period, again for several reasons: in any period a 'middle' example is apt to be more applicable to the whole than one taken from either chronological extreme; some specific developing factors—the techniques of document production, some types of early publication, etc.—cannot be exemplified satisfactorily until they are fairly well along; and more detailed examples, necessary in certain connections, can obviously be taken more reliably from the period of one's own more detailed research, which here happens to be in the

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early seventeenth century—with due attention to appropriateness, naturally, when broader application is intended. This is especially pertinent when describing comparatively *nuancé* problems. To illustrate such things as the uses of trivia in handling documents, one's choice is obviously limited to citing instances from one's own experience or relating those of others at second hand. I have naturally chosen the former (especially since this consideration is reinforced by those already noted), hoping that the reader will forgive the intrusion of personal examples, and (since references to 'the present writer' and such become tiresome) even an occasional use of the perpendicular pronoun in doing so. Where the actual text of documents is used for illustration, English ones have usually been chosen to avoid the almost inevitable damage to nuance in translation. Within the above considerations, specific examples of types of documents, collections, etc., and of problems involved in the use of diplomatic sources have been, to the degree that seems necessary, selected for their inter-relatedness in order to give a more coherent broader picture and not merely relevant but isolated detail.

C. H. C.